

# KWANZAA AND THE CIRCLE OF OUR ELDERS

Kwanzaa, which in Swahili means "First Fruits of the Harvest," embraces the collective aspirations of a people determined to enrich the meaning of their lives. The African American activist and intellectual Dr. Maulana Karenga created Kwanzaa in 1966, at a time when African blacks were considering anew the past of their forebears and the present and future roles of Africans in world affairs. It was started at the high tide of the Civil Rights Movement, a time of bold challenges to long-standing racial barriers along the remote by-ways of the South and at the heart of vast metropolitan areas in other parts of the nation. That was a time of frustration, as evidenced by the violent upheavals in the Watts section of Los Angeles in 1965, which dramatized the odd relationship of America's national optimism to the despair of many African American citizens. Most important, Kwanzaa was created to address the rising cultural consciousness of black people, linking them symbolically to the way of life of their African forebears.

In this sense, Kwanzaa is at once unique and part of a continuum of special observances by people of African ancestry in search of what they hold in common. For the longest time, African Americans clung to things African. By the mid-1960s, their numbers and the urgency of their voices converged and made possible an annual festival that linked the past to the future, the African continent to the Diaspora, and Africanist ideals to the routine of daily life. Beginning on the 26th day of December and ending on January 1st, Kwanzaa is a time of joy and reaffirmation bestowed upon, but not limited to, people of African ancestry. It is now observed by more than thirteen million people throughout the world.

At the heart of Kwanzaa is the Nguzo Saba, the seven guiding principles that distinguish each day of the observance. The first day opens with an acknowledgment of Umoja, which stresses Unity and the importance of family and community togetherness. It is followed on the second day by Kujichagulia, or Self-Determination, by which the common interests of family and community are defined. Ujima is observed on the third day, on which celebrants pledge themselves to collective work and responsibility to the past, present, and future of the communities, society, and the world at large. On the fourth day, dedicated to Ujamaa, the focus is on the importance of cooperative economics. The fifth day brings Nia, or Purpose, which encourages introspection on personal goals deemed beneficial to the community. Kuumba, observed on the sixth day, is devoted to the Creativity that enables the community to build and maintain its strength and vibrancy. On the seventh day, Imani, or Faith, honors the best traditions and sensibilities of the people and fosters a quest for a higher level of life, the affirmation of self-worth and confidence in success, and the triumph of righteousness in the historic struggle for freedom.

It is fitting that these guiding principles for Kwanzaa have taken on a deeper meaning since its inception. Out of a tortuous past that nearly obscured many traditions brought by ethnic Africans to a vast Diaspora, Kwanzaa is a remarkable ceremony it beckons modern African people, and others, to rekindle their past and their ideals for the challenges of the present and future. Kwanzaa is reverent, without racial bitterness and rancor; it is simple and yields to spiritual grace. And it seeks to replace the seductive queries of Western consumerism with Old World African sincerity and devotion to enduring truths. Kwanzaa encourages us to enjoy fellowship and commit our lives to good deeds.

It is also fitting that during this Kwanzaa season we acknowledge the good deeds of the elders of our communities. And so, we honor Dr. E. Alma Flagg, Gus Heringburg, and Amiri and Aminia Baraka. The gifts of these elders to our welfare are as rich and varied as the culture from which they come, embracing the fields of education, public policy and social activism, the arts, institution building, and urban reform. They are all parents. And they are well known to us, not only because each has been at the forefront of contemporary life here, but also because they have laid paths of life that we should follow.

Dr. E. Alma Flagg, the eldest of the four, has spent most of her adult life in public education. Not unlike other nationally renowned African American pioneers in education such as Booker T. Washington, Mary McCloud Bethune, Benjamin Mays, and Newark's own James A. Baxter, she located intellectual development at the center of the long quest for black uplift. Dr. Flagg is a graduate of the old Newark State College, where she earned the Bachelor of Science degree. She pursued graduate work at Montclair State College and at Columbia University, where she was awarded the Doctor of Education in 1955, one year after the United States Supreme Court's landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* of Topeka, Kansas.

At a time when few teachers of African ancestry taught in the Newark Public Schools, Dr. Flagg was appointed principal of Hawkins Street School, making her the first African American in Newark to lead a racially integrated school. Later, in 1967, she became assistant superintendent in charge of curriculum services for the Newark Board of Education. We now know that was a time of impending crisis in the civic culture of Newark, a time when the schoolhouse, among other public institutions, was a barometer of the differences between the rampant racial injustices of the past and a distant future when race will no longer impinge the opportunities of African American and Latino children. Dr. Flagg helped to bridge that deep chasm. As the highest ranking African American in the Newark Public Schools for many years, she promoted reforms that have stood the test of time. To her credit, she called for a generous investment in arts education, school libraries, bilingual education, reading and mathematics. She brought a remarkable devotion to hard work and high standards for accomplishment in Newark is legendary, as is her profound faith in the ability of our children to succeed when given a clear, unfettered pathway to learning. In retirement, Dr. Flagg is still vitally active in civic affairs, exemplified in her devotion to many causes and organizations, including the New Jersey Performing Arts Center.



The life of Gustav Heringburg is also richly textured by years of service to our community. Indeed, it is virtually impossible to consider the last thirty years of meaningful progress here without recognizing his contributions to civil rights, community empowerment, urban affairs, higher education, and commentary. He was the first president and chief executive officer of the Greater Newark Urban



Coalition, which helped to navigate our deeply wounded community forward in the aftermath of the upheavals during the summer of 1967. Far more than any other individual, Mr. Henningburg crafted the so-called Newark Plan that set ambitious, indeed revolutionary, standards for the training and employment of hundreds of African American and Latino construction workers in what had been for generations a racially exclusionary local labor marketplace. And yet, over the many years that were to follow, Gus Henningburg stayed in the fray of social, political, and civic change. He chaired the then newly elected Mayor Sharpe James' Transition Team in 1986, served as a Commissioner of the New Jersey Sports and Exposition Authority, chaired the Committee to Study the Governance of New Jersey's County Colleges, and, for the first decade of its existence, chaired the New Jersey Educational Opportunity Fund.

With an intellect befitting a sage, Gus Henningburg has a deep understanding of the complexities of modern society. And what he knows he shares, quite liberally, with an array of fellow citizens across the wide spectrums of culture, social class, and politics. In 1974, he successfully mediated a settlement that brought closure to the nation's longest rent strike at Stella Wright homes in Newark. Later, in 1987, then Governor Thomas Kean presented him with the first Prince-in-New Jersey Alice Paul Humanitarian Award, the highest honor the State of New Jersey can bestow upon a citizen. Many other well-deserved honors illuminate a life deeply committed to furthering the public good. Most recently, he played a distinctive role as counselor to the New Jersey Performing Arts Center's responsibilities to African American, Latino, and female craftspeople. Because of him the rich diversity of the Center's construction site will be remembered as an admirable and progressive chapter in the contemporary history of the construction trades.

The lives of Amin and Amina Baraka are also remarkably textured by service at the forefront of African American creativity, activism, and political change. A professor emeritus at SUNY Stony Brook, Mr. Baraka is one of Newark's most significant native sons and a renowned architect of contemporary Africanist thought, artistry, and social action. His voluminous writings are among our era's truly important works on black culture, music, theater, literary arts, and radicalism. Consider for example, the pivotal significance of his book, *Eyes People*, which has remained in print for a generation, and his *Black Music*, a four-decade interpretation of new wave jazz musicians of the 1960s. Those of goodwill are indeed fortunate that for many years Mr. Baraka has explored the shimmering artistry of black musicians and the challenges they face in a society that is often indifferent to talent by people of African ancestry.

Mr. Baraka's work as a narrator and interpreter of Africanist creativity enriches a large and enduring corpus of artistic contributions. His stunningly original play, *Dutchman*, garnered the OBIE award in 1964 for Best American Play. He founded the Black Arts Repertory Theater in Harlem in 1965 and, after returning to his native Newark, he started Spirit House in 1966. These efforts, which are at the epicenter of the black cultural renaissance of the 1960s, secured his place as one of the clarion voices in an era when culture, politics, race, and reaction took Americans from different cultures to the precipice of self-awareness. Mr. Baraka's inventiveness as an artist, scholar, and activist helped a nearly devastated inner-city Newark of the late 1960s transform itself to Newkirk, the culturally and politically infused urban stage on which many of the struggles of the post-industrial age would unfold. He was a driving force behind Black Nationalist politics on the local level through his chairmanship of the Committee for Unified Newark and the Congress of African People, which helped to launch the successful candidacy of Newark's first African American mayor, Kenneth A. Gibson.



Long after the political and artistic energy of the 1960s was overshadowed, in the 1970s and 1980s, by a national fascination with conservatism and nostalgia for the past, Mr. Baraka kept alive an agenda of creativity, social consciousness, protest against injustice, and hope. A critic of convention and the conceits of the privileged, he remains a brilliant and compelling force in our community. His artistic productivity, found in joint efforts with his wife Amina, includes Kinako's Blues People, a multimedia arts space in their South Ward Newark home, the jazz and poetry ensemble Blue Ark, jazz opera, and performances with some of the leading artists of our time. Most recently, he led an extraordinary production of *Lost Jazz Shines* at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center that celebrated the formative years of black performance art in America and the life and times of Willie "The Lion" Smith.

Amina Baraka's work is complementary with that of Mr. Baraka, and yet it is marked by a distinctive voice in painting, dance, acting, and poetry. A native of Charlotte, North Carolina, Ms. Baraka, in 1965 helped to launch the Jazz Arts Society in Newark and is an original member of the Spirit House Movers, a group that like none other symbolized the energy of the black performing arts scene in Newark during the late 1960s. Her stage credits include *Black Mass*, *Home on the Range*, and *Slave Ship*, all of which were written and directed by her husband. With him she founded Newark's African Free School in 1968. She served as the chairperson of the Women's Division of the Committee for a Unified Newark, a pivotally important community-based organization that created the political and social momentum essential to the election of the City's first African American mayor, Kenneth A. Gibson. Later, in 1974, she galvanized women from across the United States, Africa, and the Caribbean for the African Women's Conference, and a year later she helped organize the Multi-National Women's Conference that was held in New York City. Ms. Baraka is also the author of *Songs For The Masses*, a book of poetry, the co-author, with Mr. Baraka, of the anthology *Confirmation*, and a frequent contributor of poetry to *Black Scholar* and other widely read journals and periodicals.

Each of our honorees is emblematic of the meaning of Kwanzaa. Their lives resonate with the seven principles of the Nguzo Saba. As our elders, much can be learned from them, their commitment to kin and community, their remarkably tenacious self-determination, their work ethic and high standards of personal responsibility, their contribution to building the economic capacity of our communities to survive, their ability to set and sustain personal goals beneficial to others, their creativity, and, yes, their faith in traditions passed down from our forebears.

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